

COMMENTARY

SOVIET ANTI-SEMITISM IN HIGH GEAR

What Can the Kremlin Hope to Gain?

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IT IS a rare Cassandra that is up to the job these days. At least in the predicting of totalitarian horrors. Things always turn out worse than the gloomiest pessimist would have expected.

The anti-Semitic drive that went into high gear with the Prague trial of Rudolf Slansky *et al.* is now moving at a terrifying speed. The anti-Semitic big lie, always in the realm of the unbelievable, has in a few weeks reached the edge of the unimaginable. Hardly had the Prague defendants been hanged when the Socialist Unity (Communist) party

THE Prague trial of fourteen leaders of the Communist party of Czechoslovakia, eleven of whom were Jewish, was, as every newspaper reader knows, almost immediately followed by accusations against six Jewish doctors in Moscow, by the flight of a good part of the Jewish community remaining in East Germany, and by hints in all the satellite countries that "Zionists," "Jewish bourgeois nationalists," and persons having connections with the Joint Distribution Committee—which includes just about every Jew behind the Iron Curtain—were to be considered "imperialist" agents. PETER MEYER, who edited the text of the Prague trials published in the last issue of COMMENTARY and contributed an analysis of their meaning, and whose article "The Jewish Purge in the Satellite Countries" (September 1952) forecast the increasing use of anti-Semitism as a weapon of Communist policy, here comments on these latest developments.

in East Germany discovered a widespread "espionage and sabotage plot" headed by a former East German Politburo member, Paul Merker, and the Bonn Bundestag deputy Kurt Müller (who had been lured into East Germany and arrested there in March 1950). It was in this case no easy task to round up a respectable number of "Zionists" and "Jewish bourgeois nationalists"; there are almost no Jews in high party or government posts in East Germany. But old Chekists are not easily daunted: Paul Merker, according to the best information a Gentile, was nevertheless accused of taking part in a Zionist plot. You don't therefore have to be a Jew to qualify as a Zionist conspirator; it is enough to fall into the category of what Dr. Goebbels used to call *Judenknechte*—"lackeys of the Jews."

At about the same time, Gerhart Eisler, East Germany's propaganda chief, was fired from his job. At this writing, he is still not behind bars; but considering his past "deviations," his knowledge of the Communist underground, and his half-Jewish origin, he is not exactly what you would call a good life insurance risk. It was not only bail that he forfeited when he fled from the United States aboard the "Batory" a few years ago.

As in the case of the Prague trial, the East German arrests were only a prelude to things to come. Within a few days, squads of

secret police were descending on Jewish homes in an eager hunt for "Zionist agents"; everybody who at any time and in any way had been associated with the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee was a special object of suspicion, and since there was hardly a Jewish survivor of Nazism to whom this charitable agency hadn't lent a hand in the first postwar period, almost every Jew in Europe fell into this category. Fortunately Berlin is one place where it is still relatively easy to pass through the Iron Curtain; in a few days' time several hundred of the few thousands of East German Jews, among them the chairmen of the Jewish religious communities of Leipzig, Dresden, and Erfurt, the chief of the East German President's Chancellery, Leo Zuckermann, and a Communist deputy to the East German "parliament," Julius Meyer, reached the Western sector. What awaits those who tarried too long was evident from a statement by a not yet liquidated member of the Communist Central Committee, Hans Jendrletzky, who demanded the virtual exclusion of Jews from public life, calling them enemies of the state. In the meantime, the East German Foreign Minister, George Dertinger, head of the Communist-controlled Christian Democratic Union, was arrested on charges of treason; the purge struck at Catholics and Protestants as well as Jews.

THE Berlin events were still in the headlines when a dispatch from Budapest announced the arrest of Lajos Stoeckler, president of the Hungarian Jewish community. It is almost superfluous to repeat the charges: espionage, conspiring with the Joint Distribution Committee, illicit dealings in foreign currencies. Stoeckler was one of the most servile of the Communist creatures. He had been shoved down the throats of the Jewish community after a Communist campaign of intimidation caused all who had opposed him to be driven from their positions and arrested. Stoeckler had justified and defended every Communist crime against Hungarian Jewry, including the mass deportations of Jews from the cities in

1951. All this did not help him; he was still a Jew. His arrest was a signal for new persecutions; according to latest reports, deportations of Jews from Budapest and Szeged have been resumed.

In the meantime, Poland demanded the recall of the Israeli ambassador from Warsaw and started several prosecutions of "Zionist agents." The Rumanian radio announced the forthcoming prosecution of Ana Pauker. In Czechoslovakia, according to Yugoslav reports, Jews were ejected from apartments, chased from queues in the streets, and refused service in food stores. An official decree abolished food rations for former businessmen and other "bourgeois elements"; although Jews were not mentioned, the present atmosphere leaves no doubt that they will bear the brunt of the new law. Food is in catastrophically short supply in Czechoslovakia and to lose one's ration is to be virtually condemned to starvation.

But horrible and revelatory as all these developments were, they were overshadowed by the report from Moscow of a "doctors' plot." Nine doctors, six of them Jews, were accused of having conspired with the Joint Distribution Committee in bringing about the deaths of the Politburo members Andrei A. Zhdanov (*obit* 1948) and Alexander S. Shcherbakov (*obit* 1945), and of having attempted to "shorten the lives" of several prominent leaders of the Red Army and Navy. This dispelled even the shadow of a doubt that the Communist anti-Jewish drive was directed from Moscow. If the Prague trial with its lurid tale of a "Zionist conspiracy" recalled the Czarist-invented and Nazi-popularized legend of the Elders of Zion, the Moscow accusation harked back to the Middle Ages with their charges of Jewish poisonings and ritual murder.

But the catalogue of "Jewish crimes" was not yet exhausted. F. Kozlov, secretary of the Leningrad regional party organization, wrote in the magazine *Communist* that a number of "alien and foreign elements" had been exposed and purged in Leningrad, including persons connected with such "bourgeois nationalist counter-revolutionary or-

ganizations" as the [Jewish Socialist] Bund. The newspaper *Red Fleet* described as a representative criminal type one Greenberg, who was charged with stealing state property from public warehouses. The Ukrainian *Pravda* reported the uncovering of large-scale embezzlements in the economic administrations in Kiev, Odessa, Kharkov, and Voroshilovgrad, concluding with the statement that "the profound hatred of the people was aroused by all these Kahns and Yaroshetzkys, Grinshteins, Pers, Kaplans, and Polyakovs," many of whom had already been sentenced to death and shot. Communist newspapers in Latvia and Lithuania write in a similar vein. The Moscow daily *Komsomolskaya Pravda* denounced a blind man, Alexander Lazarevich Cohen, for exploiting Russian orphans sent to him by a children's home to assist him in his work. Fagin is thus added to the poisoners and embezzlers—Communism is apparently bent on reviving every anti-Semitic canard, medieval and modern. All this is accompanied by a denunciation of those who through their "lack of vigilance" permitted "alien elements" to obtain jobs as doctors, clerks, accountants, etc. The big pogrom is on, and anyone who is behindhand in exposing the "cosmopolitan traitors and thieves" will have to look out.

THE charges against the Moscow doctors also shed light on another aspect of the anti-Semitic purge. Analyzing the Czech faction struggle before the Slansky trial, I wrote, in COMMENTARY of September 1952: "There is no question that there were different factions among the Communist leaders in the satellite countries, competing among themselves and denouncing each other in Moscow. It is quite possible that these factions speculated on the victory of different groups in the Moscow Politburo and that Slansky and Ana Pauker bet on the wrong horse." This hypothesis would now seem to be confirmed. And the key to the explanation is to be found in the name of the alleged victim of the doctors' plot. Andrei A. Zhdanov was Stalin's comrade-in-arms and heir apparent. He died unexpectedly in August

1948, and all those close to him were later quietly purged. The party leadership took care to stress that his was a natural death; a death certificate, signed by five leading physicians, was prominently reproduced in the party press. Now, four years later, he is suddenly made the victim of an imperialist-Zionist conspiracy, and the police are openly upbraided for their negligence in failing to prevent his murder.

To one with even a slight acquaintance with Soviet history, the tale has a strangely familiar ring. In 1934, another man was Stalin's best comrade-in-arms. He too was a member of the Politburo and secretary of the Leningrad organization. And he, too, was considered Stalin's most likely successor. His name was Sergei Myronovich Kirov. Like Zhdanov he was popular, too popular. At the 17th Congress of the Communist party his speech got more applause than the Big Boss's own droning oration. Its theme: How Beautiful It Is to Live in a Socialist Country.

This beautifulness quickly passed for him. On December 1, 1934, Kirov was shot to death by a young man named Leonid Nikolayev. Reprisals followed at once. Stalin himself went to Leningrad to investigate the case. One hundred and four men, arrested long before the murder and absolutely unconnected with it, were shot without trial in the Leningrad jails. Nikolayev and several local Leningrad leaders were secretly tried, and all executed. Many thousands of Leningraders, Communist and non-Communist, were deported to Siberia. Zinoviev was given five years and Kamenev ten years in prison for "moral responsibility," though no evidence was offered of their having had any connection with the crime. But in the least publicized and most sensational of these secret trials, the heads of the Leningrad GPU, Medved and Zaporozhets, were sent to jail for having—as the official communiqué stated—"possessed information about the preparation of the attempt . . . and [having] failed to take the necessary preventive measures . . . although they had every opportunity to do so."

ALL this happened in December 1934 and January 1935. For eighteen months thereafter, everything seemed quiet. The Soviet Union had just adopted the "most democratic constitution in the world," "guaranteeing" full civil rights and liberties to all, and the gullible in the Western world (of whom there are still many left) were hailing the great democratic turn in the Bolshevik revolution.

In July 1936, however, the storm broke. The era of the great show trials began. One after another, party leaders, ministers, generals, and admirals confessed to treason, sabotage, and conspiring with Hitler. In all these trials there was a central point: every one of the successively "exposed" conspiratorial centers had organized the attempt on Kirov. Finally, in March 1938, the chief of the GPU, Yagoda himself, confessed to having been the chief instigator of the assassination. The confessions contradicted each other, were full of physical impossibilities and ardent nonsense,* but what did that matter?

In the end, almost all the old Bolsheviks and millions of more obscure victims paid for the assassination of Kirov, organized, as the Soviet Union officially admitted, by the GPU.

But Kirov's assassination was not the only one confessed to by Yagoda and his fellow defendants under Vishinsky's delicate prompting. The former GPU chief Menzhinsky, the Communist leader Kuibyshev, the writer Maxim Gorky, and other important figures were among their victims. Their deaths, when they occurred, had been attributed to natural causes. But in 1938 their physicians confessed to having killed them, on the orders of Yagoda, by poisoning and malpractice.

Substitute Zhdanov for Kirov, Beria for Yagoda, and the nine doctors for the Kremlin physician Dr. Levin and his associates, who confessed to the murder of Gorky, and what illuminating perspectives are disclosed on the past and future!

Yet there is something new in the current

*For an excellent analysis of these trials, see Hugo Dewar's *Assassins at Large* (Beacon Press).

allegations. Many of the 1936-38 defendants were Jews, but this was not officially stressed. It was a "Trotskyite-Bukharinist," not a "Zionist" conspiracy. There is one—*only one*—new feature in the present script, and *that is its anti-Semitic character*.

We have an interesting piece of evidence to show that anti-Semitism was dragged into the "doctors' plot" by the heels. The medical report on Zhdanov's death, published in *Pravda* on September 1, 1948, was signed by Drs. Yegorov, Vinogradov, Fedorov, Vasilenko, and Mayorov, all non-Jews. Three of these—Yegorov, Vinogradov, and Mayorov—are now accused of being members of the criminal conspiracy. But the names of six new physicians were added. These are: M. S. Vovsi, M. B. Kogan, B. B. Kogan, A. S. Feldman, Y. G. Ettinger, A. Grinshtein—all of them Jews.

IT IS evident that open anti-Semitism has now become established Soviet policy. Soviet moves abroad, propaganda campaigns at home, intra-party struggles, whatever their other reasons, will be accompanied by attacks on the Jews. Why?

There are three probable answers to this question, each of them containing a part of the truth.

1. The Jews must be made responsible for all the failures of the regime—they serve as convenient and traditional scapegoats.

2. American democracy, still popular among the peoples of the Soviet empire in spite of the furious and incessant vilification of the United States, must be compromised by associating it with an international Jewish conspiracy.

3. And, finally, reactionary, fascist, and Nazi allies must be won over by an appeal to their anti-Semitism.

But does it pay? Isn't Stalin losing more than he gains when he exchanges his old support on the left for new allies among the Nazis, fascists, Moslem reactionaries, and Peronistas?

There is a misunderstanding behind this question. Stalin is not *substituting* an alliance with the "right" for his manipulation

of the "left." He is trying to play both cards at once. The national fronts that his agents now propagandize for in many countries are intended to rally both left-wing and right-wing support behind the standards of "national sovereignty," "peace," and "neutrality." Of course, the rightists must be offered something concrete and tempting—Soviet anti-Semitism. But the "leftists," Stalin may well believe, will serve voluntarily and without compensation. Didn't many of them swallow the 1936 Moscow trials without batting an eye, recommending them to Western public opinion as proof of the "higher Soviet democracy"? Didn't they condone the Hitler-Stalin pact, promptly putting it out of mind as soon as Hitler forced the Soviet Union to stand up and fight Germany? Do they not support the mendacious Communist campaign for Julius and Ethel Rosenberg at this very moment, when international Communism has begun openly to harry and persecute Jews? Don't they debate whether it is "really" anti-Semitism, hiding the plain truth from themselves and others in a cloud of metaphysical distinctions? Don't the springs of their wrath flow furiously at the mention of what they call witch hunts in the United States, while they greet the grim realities of the Soviet purges with an apathetic grimace? Why should Stalin feel anything but profound contempt for fellow-travelers and neutralists, not to speak of "careful and balanced non-Communists"?*

BUT this is still not the whole story. Inevitably, we try to explain every totali-

*This new line is not a novel development in Russian imperialist policy. Consider this shrewd characterization of Russian policy in the two previous centuries: "Enlightenment was the slogan of Czarism in Europe during the eighteenth century as was National Liberation in the nineteenth. There was no land-grab, no outrage, no repression on the part of Czarism which was not carried out under the pretext of enlightenment, of liberalism, of the liberation of nations. And the childish Western European liberals believed it right down to Gladstone, while the equally simple conservatives believed just as tenaciously in phrases about the protection of legitimacy, the maintenance of order, of religion, of the Euro-

tarian move in rational terms; we assume it is based on a conscious and clever calculation. We know that there is a system to the totalitarian madness.

But we sometimes forget that there is also madness in the totalitarian system. We know what advantages in loot and demagoguery Hitler got from his persecution of the Jews. But we also know that in the end he lost more than he won. And the Russian Great Purge of the 30's resulted in such a weakening of the Soviet regime that only Western help saved it from going down before Germany in World War II.

Totalitarian systems have their own fateful logic. As they cannot refrain from reaching out to seize and exploit foreign countries, their goal the world itself, until they unite the world against them, so they cannot and don't want to call a halt to the "liquidating" of ever newer groups of their subjects. The more their difficulties, the greater the purges. But each purge creates new difficulties and conflicts. What started as a shrewd move against some manufactured "traitors" swells into a monstrous saturnalia of denunciation and terror involving a large proportion of the population. Nobody short of Stalin can moderate or halt the bloodletting without himself becoming suspect. The instigators of the terror become captives of **their own policy**. Inventing imperialist Trotskyist-Zionist plots, they perhaps end by believing their own inventions.

This was certainly the case with Hitler. Many thought Stalin was different. The lunatic purges of the 30's should have already given them pause. And the present

pean balance of powers, of the sanctity of treaties—slogans which official Russia simultaneously utters. Russian diplomacy alone was allowed to be legitimist and revolutionary, conservative and liberal, orthodox and enlightened in the same breath. One can understand the contempt with which a Russian diplomat looks down on the 'educated' West." The quotation is from an article which appeared in the Russian emigré journal *Sotsialdemokrat* in Geneva in 1890. The author is Friedrich Engels. (The English translation is quoted from *The Russian Menace to Europe*, by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, selected and edited by Paul W. Blackstock and Bert F. Hoselitz, Free Press, 1952.)

anti-Semitic campaign, with its paranoid horror stories, compulsive repetition of a previous pattern, absurdities, and contempt for reality, is no product of shrewd calculation alone. World Communism's adoption of open and organized anti-Semitism and genocide as means of national and international policy has not only erased the last moral difference between the Nazi and Soviet rulers, it is also proof that totalitarian regimes, regardless of their ideological origins, find themselves driven along the same fatal course.

But before it reaches the end of its course, Soviet totalitarianism can destroy additional

millions by executions, slow murder in the concentration camps, genocide—and war. The more lunatic the Soviet drive against groups in the lands it dominates, and the more violent its accusations against the free world, the nearer we come to war. Our answer to the threat of Communist irrationality can be neither timid appeasement nor a despairing reconciliation of ourselves to the inevitability of war. Wisdom still offers a way; by the demonstration of strength, intelligently and firmly exercised, we can give the Kremlin pause, recapture the initiative, and force it back on a permanent—and for it disastrous—defensive.